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Feminist political ecology

- Draw on women as natural resource users and managers in environmental mitigation initiatives;
- Increase outreach and networking between disaster agencies and women in environmental justice and sustainable development organizations;
- Include women in planning and environmental science professions and caucuses on local mitigation and preparedness initiatives;
- Target women as informal neighborhood leaders around community health and safety issues for partnership with emergency practitioners;
- Integrate gender analysis into mitigative environmental strategies and assess sex-specific impacts, for example regarding access to land, workload and time, and social power.

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THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS IN DISASTER:

Balancing resilience and vulnerability

Maureen Fordham

INTRODUCTION

Those who experience disaster are widely regarded as an undifferentiated group, labeled "victims." In the immediate crisis period, it is difficult for professionals to differentiate, except crudely, between varying levels of need and still carry out urgent duties and responsibilities. However, it soon becomes apparent that some are hit harder than others and that disasters are not the great levelers they are sometimes considered to be. Close examination reveals complex variations within, and not just between, social groups broadly understood as middle- and working-class. This paper examines the intersection of gender and social class in two major flood events and argues for a more nuanced appreciation of these factors, at both the conceptual and the practical level, to be incorporated throughout the disaster process.

Too often, those who are subject to the impact of disasters are conceptualized as belonging to a homogeneous group called "victims," but this apparent similarity conceals considerable difference: difference

in terms of gender, class, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, culture, etc. Dealing with difference represents a significant challenge for disaster managers, one that remains largely unrecognized or suppressed in favor of a sometimes spurious egalitarianism which attempts to treat everyone the same. In this sense difference has been problematized. However, this paper argues that recognizing difference in disaster is part of the solution, not the problem. Equality, inasmuch as it is consistent with social justice, cannot be achieved by ignoring differences; this simply reinforces the dominance of already dominant groups (Phillips 1997: 143). Rather it will be achieved (partly) through recognizing other voices and moving to reduce marginalization. Nevertheless, there remains a danger that an *emphasis* on difference, rather than a recognition and incorporation of it, will divide not unite (Harvey 1993) and may lead to a reinforcing of competition over resources.

Seeking a more nuanced approach to disaster management should not be interpreted as an adherence to a "faddish" political correctness nor an acceptance of post-modern critiques of grand narratives and universalizing theory. Rather, it is presented here in the context of a recognition that resilience to disaster comes often from dependence upon, and reciprocity within, small and changing networks of individuals (see Peacock et al. 1997 for similar conclusions), within and between varying social groups. The recognition of these differences can lead to a redistribution, not just of resources but also of risk and exposure to harm, and to the enabling and reinforcing of coping strategies within a broader context of social justice (accepting that a universally agreed definition of that concept is problematic). However, it must also be recognized that the notion of community itself is contested and can represent exclusion as well as inclusion (Young 1990; Massey 1994).

GENDER AND DISASTER

Disaster research focusing specifically on gender is a small but growing field (see Enarson 1998; Ferguson and Byrne 1994; and Fothergill 1996 for recent reviews of the literature and research issues).

Most of the work in this area is located within so-called "development" or "Third World" studies (see, for example, Agarwal 1990; Ali 1987; Begum 1993; Blaikie et al. 1994; Dreze and Sen 1989; Jiggins 1986; Kerner and Cook 1991; Rivers 1982; Sen 1988, 1990; Vaughan 1988; Walker 1994;), but increasingly it is recognized that a gender-sensitive analysis is necessary for understanding the industrial (or post-industrial) nations of the North (Bolin 1982; Enarson and Morrow 1998; Fordham 1998; Fordham and Ketteridge 1995, 1998; Morrow and Enarson 1994, 1996; Neal and Phillips 1990; Scanlon 1996). In much of this work, the focus is specifically on making *women* visible in disasters and on the ways that women are vulnerable to, and made more vulnerable in, extreme events, whether floods in Bangladesh (Ahmad 1994) or Britain (Fordham 1998), hurricanes in the U.S. (Enarson and Morrow 1997), or earthquakes in India (Maybin 1994; Tokle 1994). A male-dominated official disaster response milieu (Myers 1994; Fordham 1998) has been slow in recognizing women's particular needs and experiences in disaster. However, these experiences are embedded in socially constructed modes of living which make women (and others) chronically vulnerable in their everyday existence (Blaikie et al. 1994; Hewitt 1997), necessitating more fundamental social change. Thus, the research trajectory must now bring traditional, redistributive, and social justice issues together with a recognition of difference.

EQUALITY/DIFFERENCE

The paired categories of equality and redistribution on the one hand, and difference and recognition on the other, are seen as mutually exclusive aims of conflicting projects which broadly can be stated as socialist (or, even more broadly, "Left") and identity politics, respectively. A socialist, redistributive politics, which has been characterized as "universalist" and "for *all* human beings" (Hobsbawm 1996: 43), has been challenged, nevertheless, for privileging class above or even to the exclusion of other axes of social division—particularly gender—and thus rejecting "difference." Furthermore:

[T]he differences that are suppressed are differences from those who occupy positions of power and who have the authority to define knowledge Thus, to qualify for equality means becoming indistinguishable from the authors of this viewpoint: white, Western, bourgeois men. And the spurious claim to universality effectively creates excluded, minoritized groups. (Bondi 1993: 86)

A cultural politics of identity resists and challenges dominant, universalist notions of the human subject and is part of "an emancipatory politics of opposition" (Bondi 1993: 86). However, it too has been criticized as, *inter alia*, a divisive, fragmenting process which reduces the potential of reaching a critical mass capable of political action: "[I]dentity groups are about themselves, for themselves, and nobody else" (Hobsbawm 1996: 44).

Attempts have been made to deal with "the redistribution-recognition dilemma" (Fraser 1995: 70) in theoretical terms through a suggested coalition drawing on the transformative potential of a socialist politics of redistribution linked with a deconstructive cultural politics of recognition (Fraser 1997: 28). Separatism is seen to be a political "dead end" while strength lies in coalition (cited in Adams 1994: 346). However, the difficulties of forming such a coalition of "multiple, intersecting struggles against multiple, intersecting injustices" (Fraser 1997: 32) are acknowledged. It is through this difficult coalition, a collective project but one not without conflict (Phillips 1997: 153), that the route to social justice lies.

Recognition of difference is closely associated with the feminist challenge to the masculine, universalizing theory of the Enlightenment project (Di Stefano 1990) which emphasizes rationality and objective truth. However, it has itself fallen prey to its own form of biological and cultural essentialism in which the female subject has been fixed rather than continually re-created through processes of change and construction. But, notwithstanding the importance of biological factors in partly explaining women's subordination (through reproductive labor), women's oppression also has a material basis (McDowell 1986, p. 31) and is not reducible to biological difference. The concept of a

universal female experience has been seen as "a clever confidence trick" (cited in McDowell 1986, p. 313), but much feminist theory presents gender as a variable of human identity independent of other variables such as race and class (Spelman 1988 in Gould 1997, p. 149).

However, concepts of difference, often located within a postmodernist discourse, have been challenged by black, lesbian and working-class feminists, claiming feminist theory has been dominated by white, middle-class, heterosexual women (see, for example, hooks 1982; Davis 1982; Evans 1997; Lorde 1981, 1984; Rowbotham 1973; Threlfall 1996; Walby 1990; Walker 1984). While difference between women is now more widely accepted, nevertheless there has been some reaction that this differentiation has resulted, depending on your position, in either a dangerous fragmenting of the women's movement or in a maturing process of greater inclusiveness and radical possibility. "Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding" (hooks 1994: 427).

GENDER AND CLASS

This paper looks particularly at gender and class because of their observed significance in the two case studies to be discussed and because of their relative invisibility, in different ways, in disaster and feminist studies. Skeggs argues that "class as a concept and working-class women as a group have almost disappeared from the agendas of feminism and cultural theory" (Skeggs 1997: 2). In disaster research, both categories of gender and class are accepted individually as important explanatory variables in different sub-disciplinary areas and at different times but less frequently are recognized *together* as having some salience in understanding the creation of inequality and vulnerability. The aim here is not to claim overriding primacy for these two social categories over others but merely to attempt to make manageable the complexity of particular empirical findings in which, for example, race/ethnicity are not salient but gender and class are. The paper does not offer a neat, summative theoretical proposition (the small number of interviews and the lack of representativeness do not

allow this) but rather offers initial observations that challenge simple constructions of class and gender and point toward the need for more finely-structured observations in the field and by disaster managers.

It is acknowledged that traditional descriptors of class have been contested from both general sociological (Clark and Lipset 1998; Hout et al. 1998; Prandy 1990; Saunders 1990) and specific feminist perspectives (Skeggs 1997; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997; Walby 1990). However, here is not the place for an extended discussion of social stratification theory and its problems and so this paper adopts a broad definition and understanding of class which locates interviewees into one of two classes, middle or working. This simple class position is based on inter alia: the individual's, i.e., women in their own right and not subsumed under that of an assumed male head of household, relationship to the means of production (Miliband 1987; Westergaard and Resler 1976;) to which of the British Registrar General's categories they belong, i.e., related to unskilled, skilled, and professional occupations (OPCS 1992); and also including a cultural model of class based on "capital" (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) movements through social space (cf. Bourdieu 1986: 114, 291). This position is in some opposition to Walby's position that the concept of class should not be used to cover non-economic forms of inequality "since to do so would be to wrench the concept too far from its heritage" (Walby 1990: 13).

Interviewees were not asked to which social class they felt they belonged but rather were assigned to a class (either working or middle class) on the basis of a combination of several of the following factors: their job/profession and/or that of their partner where relevant; whether they owned or rented their home; where they lived; and level of education, lifestyle, and manner (Abbott and Sapsford 1987). Thus, typical middle-class characteristics were: home-ownership; living in areas with medium to high land/property values; having post-compulsory education; and having, now or previously, a professional occupation (social worker, business owner, etc.). Typical working-class characteristics were: having a tenancy, living in social housing; having little if any post-compulsory education; and having, now or previously, a manual or semi-skilled occupation (cleaner, hairdresser, etc.). However, in neither case were categories fixed and immutable.

VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The study of hazards and disasters has been guided for many years by the so-called "dominant paradigm" (Hewitt 1983) which places a major focus on the hazard agent and the individual response to it. However, an alternative "vulnerability paradigm" has been developing which places its focus on differential vulnerability to hazard and disaster and the contextualizing of disaster within everyday vulnerabilities (Blaikie et al. 1994; Varley 1994; Hewitt 1997). This paradigm recognizes interlocking systems of vulnerability in both physical and social space—"geographies of vulnerability" (Hewitt 1997, p. 164).

The development of the vulnerability paradigm has similarities to that of feminist theory where the early stage of the project was to recognize and document the ways in which women, as a group, were subordinated and oppressed. However, the imposition of this static condition of "victim" was seen to be both partial and disempowering, and so the feminist project shifted its emphasis towards difference and resistance. The vulnerability paradigm is also moving from an identification of social causation and the recognition of vulnerable groups ("victim") to a more nuanced understanding of how social groups (defined by gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.) differ between and within themselves and how they are never simply victims, but also survivors and active agents.

It is as a contribution to this latter point in the paradigm's development that this paper is addressed. The questions it asks are not just what makes women vulnerable to, and in, disasters, but also, more positively, what creates resilience?

CASE STUDIES

Two case studies are used primarily, arising from major floods in Scotland: Perth in 1993 and Strathclyde in 1994. The early stages of this research were undertaken as part of the European Union-funded "EUROflood Project" co-ordinated by Middlesex University (Ketteridge, Fordham, and Clarke 1996; Ketteridge and Fordham

1996; Penning-Rowse 1996; Penning-Rowse and Fordham 1994) in which gender analysis was merely a part. A more specific gender and vulnerability focus has developed subsequently (Fordham 1998; Fordham and Ketteridge 1998).

A series of in-depth, qualitative interviews were carried out at various periods (from three months to four years) after the events and supported by a number of informal meetings and interviews with professionals connected with the events. The initial interviewees were mostly working-class women from large social housing estates who had been impacted throughout the disaster process in ways invisible to disaster managers. However, their relatively homogeneous social position raised the methodological question of whether these women's experiences were identifiably and primarily gendered or dependent upon their class position. More interviews were undertaken subsequently with middle-class homeowners and professionals from various locations in the same flooded regions to explore this specific social class dimension, and it is this which forms the basis for this paper.

In an additional study area, twelve interviews were carried out in August 1997, one month after major flooding occurred in the Moray region of Scotland (Fordham 1998). These were with men and women, working- and middle-class, professionals and victims/survivors. Occasional reference will be made to these where relevant.

The most recent research began from an initial assumption that working-class disaster victims would be impacted harder and for longer than middle-class victims. On a continuum from vulnerability to resilience, the working-class community would be located at the vulnerable end and the middle-class community at the resilient end, purely on the basis of access to resources (with resources recognized to be not simply economic but also cultural). While this was generally the case, the reality, as with most research, revealed a much more complex matrix rather than a simple binary opposition. However, in identifying strengths in working-class communities and weaknesses in middle-class ones, this paper should not be read as a denial of fundamental inequalities or special pleading on behalf of middle-class disaster victims. The argument is not that social class has no analytical power but rather that it must be interrogated closely to reveal an often hidden diversity.

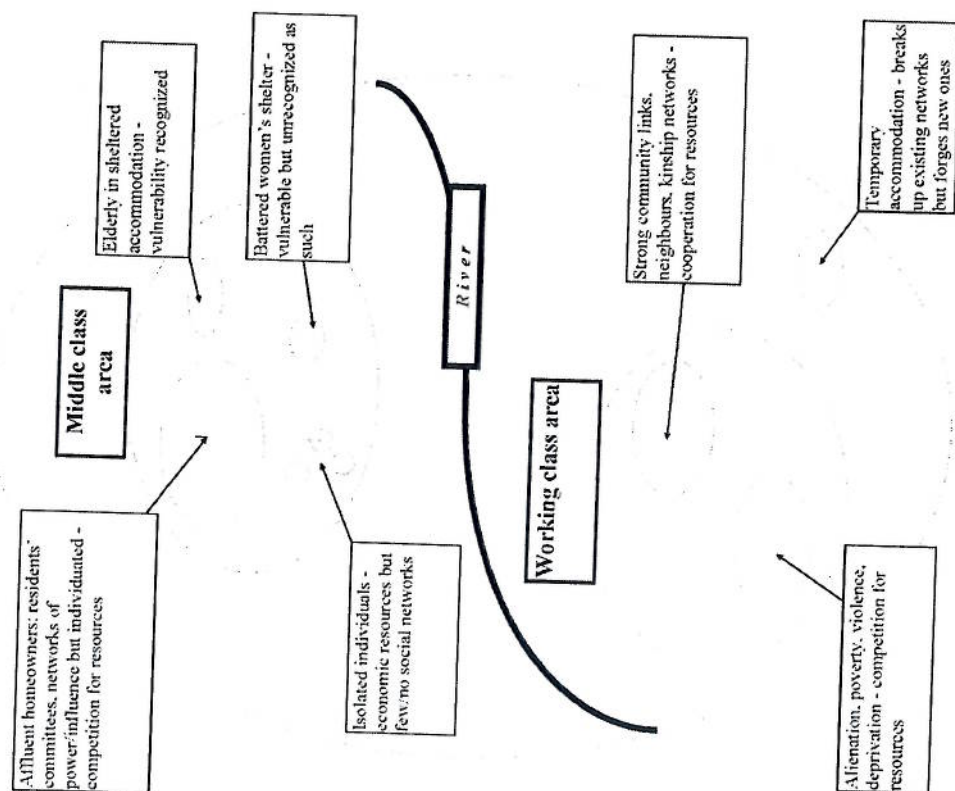
Beyond social class, vulnerability-creation and resilience-building are also dependent upon sometimes inter-linking—sometimes divergent—networks of individuals and groups within the wider community. A parallel (but much larger) research project in the U.S. on Hurricane Andrew (Peacock, Morrow, and Gladwin 1997) arrives at a similar conclusion, that “a community is an ecological network of groups and organizations linked through divisions of labor based on contingent relationships” in which competition and conflict are inherent (Peacock and Ragsdale 1997: 24). While evidence was found, in both Hurricane Andrew and the two case studies presented here, of the “therapeutic community,” so also was its opposite: “While co-operation certainly exists, recovery typically entails sets of negotiations that can best be characterized as competitive, potentially conflict-ridden, and stressful. Many of the network’s social units occupy similar niches, placing them in competition for scarce resources and services” (Peacock and Ragsdale 1997: 25). It is important not to see these networks as static but rather dynamic and contingent. Disaster management itself is an agent of change in this landscape and must be alert to its effects. This is discussed further below.

The next section attempts to set out, in simplified form, some of the socio-spatial variation within a given disaster-hit community. The class factor is the main focus here (see Fordham 1998 and Fordham and Ketteridge 1998 for the specifically gendered perspective on these case studies).

“Rivertown”

Figure 1 shows a simplified community called “Rivertown” in a landscape of flood risk. It is intended to illustrate some of the complexity hidden in commonly used categories and concepts such as “community,” “working-class,” “middle-class,” etc. Rivertown is clearly a fictitious community but one based on specific case study areas in Scotland, and the examples and verbatim extracts given below are real examples. Nevertheless, it remains a simplified representation of ideal types and it is accepted that for all the examples given, there will be many exceptions.

Figure 2: "Rivertown"



Rivertown can be regarded from the outside as a community (the problematic status of that term is accepted), but it contains within it a complex array of sub-communities, neighborhoods, and networks which are often socially and spatially distinct. In disasters, the geographic "labels" used to name them are often deceptive, tending to conceal more than they reveal. Particular locations are used to name disaster events because such areas may be well known, representative of the dominant social group, where the major damage was caused, or just where the media first located themselves. This can impose an erroneous homogeneity on the total disaster-hit area and can make invisible the smaller, often socially and politically subordinate groups and locations. Similarly, if "Rivertown" is the label given by the media to, in this case, a particular flood event, it may only be representative of one particular group, to the detriment of others. Even Rivertown is heterogeneous and must be subject to deconstruction.

In most localities, there are obvious physical differences between the easily recognizable working—and middle-class areas. In Rivertown, the former is distinguished by (frequently large) estates of tenanted social housing, often of architectural uniformity; the latter, by owner-occupied properties, generally small in number, often of some architectural variety. While physical distances may be small between these two locations, the inhabitants remain strangers to each other, with, sometimes surprisingly, little understanding of each other's experiences and needs.

The working-class community

In the working-class community there may be differences, spatially delineated and historically determined, which work for or against vulnerability limitation. The working-class community in Rivertown is divided into three different sub-areas for illustrative purposes.

The first working-class sub-community comprises alienated individuals or small groups living in poverty, violence, and deprivation. Here, women are survivors from everyday crises and have to be resilient, but disaster events can finally overwhelm their coping strategies. Here there is competition for resources, and information concerning the

availability of disaster relief supplies sometimes does not pass further than the household or close family. Disaster management does not operate as expected because the emergency services (police especially) are not seen as sympathetic, and community members' first call for help goes instead to social workers and counselors who are outside the emergency response loop. Thus help is delayed, and individuals find later that they have inadvertently bypassed the main support services and missed out on support that others received.

Local authorities often have lists of cheap hotel and Bed and Breakfast (in Britain, unlike in the U.S., refers to less expensive rooms) accommodation for use in times of emergency such as floods or, more frequently, to house homeless people. When extreme events occur, they have to telephone around to find more. Because resources are limited (and, arguably, sometimes because of value judgements about those in need), these places are at the lower end of the quality scale and may not have been officially "vetted" for suitability and standards. While it appears to those outside the situation that social housing tenants have been well and efficiently provided for, an insider's view is often at variance:

They sent us to the X Guest House. We went there and thought "great, this is lovely, clean." Because upstairs was immaculate, spotless. They took us down to show us the rooms . . . it was filthy. The bedding, there was cigarette burns all over it, there was urine stains all over it . . . There were cooking facilities but only at a certain time . . . They wouldn't put the heating on. When we left the [flooded] house, we left with nothing, just what we had on . . . I asked the landlady if she could give us a wee towel, and she said no, they didn't supply the towels because the tenants who'd been in were stealing them, and I said, but we're flood victims, I'm just asking for a towel to wash ourselves and we'll bring it straight back up. I said the kids are filthy, they're needing [to be] washed. So for four days and four nights, we couldn't get back into our own houses to get the kids' clothes, we didn't know there

were places we could go to, to get clothing Nobody had told us these things, that you could go to certain places to get clothing, and things that you needed It felt as though they weren't doing enough for us . . . [a flood had] never happened to us before, so they didn't know what they were doing Social Work department, the Housing, you know, these people didn't know what they were doing, they were just as confused as we were.

This gives an insight, not just into the plight of flood victims, but of homeless persons who have to face this prospect daily. Clearly, when extreme events occur, there is a major demand on accommodation that has to be met with whatever is available. However, before (or soon after) placing highly traumatized individuals and families in temporary accommodation, it is vital that certain minimal checks are carried out. Public money is being used to pay for this particular form of private enterprise, and minimum standards must be insisted.

The flood-hit Rivertown may be further internally divided through disaster management decisions for the allocation of relief funds. The management of collections of many thousands of pounds for disaster victims is always highly political and very sensitive. In Rivertown a decision was made to allocate funds according to need, to those without insurance, for example, rather than simply according to flood experience. The "Flood Fund" became re-named the "Hardship Fund," and, while this may appear a just and efficient use of always limited funds, the result here was to stigmatize those without insurance and anger those in possession of it. It became a significant cause of conflict within the community to the extent that neighbors no longer spoke to each other afterwards.

The community has been cut right down the middle, because people got a lot of money.

* * *

It was just from one side of the road to the other side of the road The [river] did a lot of damage but money done more.

* * *

Once they came home [from the temporary accommodation] and you saw . . . I mean there was a lady, and I've seen her house, and I mean I would kill for her house, kill for it! [said laughing]. And this is what everybody is saying. People who weren't insured got better houses, better than they ever had. Everything was new. I would kill for that!

Those without insurance are seen by the insured as irresponsible in not choosing to protect themselves against future flood risk and therefore not deserving of relief funds. However, in some high-crime areas, flood insurance (with premiums set on crime statistics, not flood risk) is unavailable to the poorest members because it is too expensive; it is not necessarily the case that they *choose* not to buy insurance.

An example from the 1997 Moray floods is indicative of the problems that can arise in the use of temporary accommodation that normally has a specific function. One family (a lone mother with two children at home) was placed in a homeless persons' hostel. While this property was newly built, structurally sound, clean, and well decorated, its usual tenants were subject to strict rules which were also imposed on the flood victims. There was no personal telephone (one was available in the Warden's office where there was no privacy); tenants had to check in and out, including all visitors (this was very difficult for the children and their friends who also had to check in and out each time). No visitors were allowed after 11:00 p.m.; tenants had to report if likely to be out late; the key to the dwelling could not be taken off the premises. No alcohol was allowed on the premises, and staff came in daily to check for damage.

As a council tenant she had no choice but to accept this accommodation. She could not choose to go anywhere else. And choice, or the lack of it, is the key differentiating factor between the middle-class and working-class areas and people. While some of the difficulties faced by middle-class flood victims are set out below, nevertheless, at a general level, they are less vulnerable through their ability to exercise choice and a degree of control over their lives.

The second working-class area has strong community links, neighbor and kinship networks:

I went down, got my pensioner [senior citizen] and put most of her stuff up [stairs], and I said "Right, lock up and come and stay with us."

* * *

[In] the flooding everybody coped together. "Can I help you?" "I've got clothes there," "I've got this here." Because everybody was in the same boat. And everybody helped everybody out. You know, "I've got stuff over here," "I've got a kettle you could have." . . . Yeh it was great . . . there was a great community spirit.

In such communities, neighbors/relatives check that all have received the call to evacuate before themselves evacuating, and there is co-operation over resources (when one hears of free clothing being given to flood survivors, they tell the others so all can benefit). Because many working-class communities are situated in large estates, vulnerability is reduced through strength of numbers and the support systems (both official and unofficial) which accompany them. Because of the large numbers in one place, emergency services prioritize the area for evacuation; after the flood, insurance companies may set up mobile offices to give help and advice to claimants, and the local authorities often set up a "Flood Team" to give advice on claiming from flood or hardship funds. However, a more negative aspect may be a process of "massification," where people feel that they are never treated as individuals with specific needs but always as an undifferentiated group—"flood victim." They are made to feel grateful for what they are given even when it is inadequate or misplaced.

Existing community networks are sometimes disrupted by disaster management itself when people are split up and moved away to temporary accommodation while their disaster-damaged homes are repaired. Women who care for sick, disabled, or elderly relatives and neighbors or provide unpaid child care for their grandchildren

perform a vital—though insufficiently acknowledged—community function:

I was kind of worried about my Ma as well because the days [the home help] wasn't in I would go down . . . to make her supper, then I'd be down to put her to bed, because she's disabled. But with all that happening I couldn't go near my Ma.

I'm [wanting] somewhere where me and my daughter can be next to each other. Just for the sake of me watching the bairn [child] for her, she would need to pay a childminder and she's not got the money, and I wouldn't like anybody else to watch my grand-bairn, it's my only one, my first, I wouldn't like anybody else to watch her.

But even simple friendships provide a lifeline for unemployed women alone or with young children at home on a daily basis:

I feel kind of lost just not being next to Jean. We were next door to each other. Just being away from her I've felt lost. Just so alone . . . It's only wee silly things. They mean that much to you, but obviously people don't see it that way because they've not been through it . . . but all the wee things, they mean that much to you and suddenly not to have them any more, it can upset you . . . If it happens to me again, I'm not coming out of my house . . . It's not on.

Where some choice can be exercised over the location of people in temporary accommodation it is important that women are not separated from their support networks. However, there is the potential for new networks to be forged in these more distant locations. Women in temporary accommodation in a caravan park formed new networks in the laundry area where 50 families had to share one, later two, washing machines (Fordham 1998; Fordham and Ketteridge 1998):

The camaraderie amongst the women was second to none. All folk were in the laundry. But none of these women could identify any of the others' partner! They'd be sitting in the caravans at night and a man would pass. They wouldn't be able to say who it was. Because the men lived in solitude. They went out to work, came back and sat in the caravan. There wasn't the same mix, the men didn't mix on the site.

And similar disruptions and bondings occur when people return to their repaired homes: "It was strange coming back here because the neighbor we did know [before the flood], we didn't know again, if you know what I mean. You forgot about them, you just had to make friends with them again . . . it was like starting again." Thus, working-class communities show an internal diversity of experience which may manifest itself as either vulnerability or resilience.

The middle-class community

The middle-class community can also be seen to be divided into several sub-communities. The first is the more (stereo)typical, containing relatively affluent homeowners with access to economic resources, insurance, networks of power and influence in the wider community, and social and cultural capital. These resources tend to make them resilient. For example, they are better able to replace lost belongings, to influence future mitigation proposals in their interest, and, through their class position, to command respect (see Skeggs 1997 on the importance of respectability to working-class women). Action groups, set up to campaign for flood defense works, are often gendered and dominated by the men in the local area who assume responsibility in this, the more public, domain. However, a key defining value of individualism, usually seen by the middle-class as a major strength, can be a weakness in disaster and can increase vulnerability. The middle-class victims of disaster and act as individuals to protect their interests with insurance companies, builders, letting agencies, etc.

in competition with each other. Some have compared their own experiences unfavorably to working-class communities (see also Morrow 1997: 167, for similar findings) who had agents working for them as a group and who appeared to have had better conditions and services secured for them:

Where it's council property that's affected they will get work done quicker than what they would if it's private property. I think you're left very much on your own. "Well, too bad," you know, "you get on with it." This is the attitude I think.

* * *

And what we found here was all the help was focused on X [working-class housing estate]. I mean we got no help whatsoever . . . Everything was focused on X . . . nothing got filtered out here . . . and that got on our nerves.

* * *

They [the Flood Team] did a lot. I know, they organized a lot for the kids and all that kind of thing but I felt that it was for people that were with the council. I didn't think it was really for us . . . "Us"! That sounds really snobby but you think that they're actually less fortunate than you whereas they're not . . . if you'd bought your house then you weren't quite as welcome to go to get benefits and things like that. That when you went they were all looking at you and saying "Tut! Greedy person" sort of thing, you know "you can manage yourself" whereas you don't always manage yourself.

Some middle-class residents had difficulty finding temporary accommodation while their homes were being repaired. They were in competition with the other flood victims, and good property nearby was hard to find. They found themselves forced to take low quality, rented houses which were dirty and in poor repair—well below what they normally considered to be an acceptable standard. This they contrasted with the powers of local authorities to get access more

easily to large numbers of better quality properties for their tenants. (The working-class interviewees, however, often had other views on the properties made available to them; see above.)

The second, middle-class community sub-division is elderly sheltered or wardened accommodation where age and infirmity make the residents potentially vulnerable. Ironically, however, such places are usually well known in terms of their exposure to risk; they appear on relevant lists and generally are among the first to be contacted ("rescued") in times of disaster. Thus, this particular sub-community becomes less susceptible through its visibility and identification as vulnerable. However, this is not always the case, and emergency responders cannot be complacent about this and assume that someone has contacted the residents, as this example from the working-class community illustrates:

By this time [the water] was coming in, all the drains were coming up, so I thought, "Right, I'll get out the back." It was worse out the back, I couldn't get out there either. So I've one of those alarm phones and I pressed the button and, they're very, very good, so she said, "How can we help you Mrs A?" I said, "This place is being flooded." "Yes," she said, "We're watching it on the television!" "Well," I said, "would you please get somebody to get us out!"

This experience was told with some humor, but it could have had serious consequences. Sheltered housing, as in this case, is normally single story with no upper floors to which to escape, and in Rivertown the floodwaters rose with considerable speed and to a depth sufficient to drown.

Thirdly, an elderly middle-class woman on her own in an outlying fragmented community or isolated location, even if she has financial resources and insurance, is potentially as vulnerable and in need of help as a woman in a large working-class community which may not have the same financial resources or insurance but may have access to social networks such as neighbors, family, and welfare support workers. Post-disaster resources are often located—for very good reasons—in

those locations deemed to be, numerically, hardest hit, but there is a danger that pressing needs on the small or individual scale will be neglected as this example illustrates:

There was an emergency number we had seen in the paper and we phoned this number and . . . very cheeky he was too and he said, "Oh we're very busy in X [large social housing estate], it's flooded there too." And I said, "Yes, but I'm flooded here and I'm an old lady," I says, "and I live on my own," and I mean by this time I was literally on my own because nobody could get down . . . "Oh, leave your name and we'll get back to you." Never heard from them yet! At the time all I wanted was somebody to come in and give a little bit of an ear or just a little bit of comfort or tell me what to do or tell me how to do things.

Such women alone can be very vulnerable during a disaster (having few or no neighbors to call on for help to move property to safety or to help them evacuate) and afterwards in terms of access to information and psychological support.

Fourthly, there may be women victims of domestic violence who may be invisible in their own households or, potentially, more visible in shelters for battered women. This is a group not as yet widely recognized in disaster management (Morrow and Enarson 1994; Enarson 1998) and therefore potentially vulnerable:

Severe weather events . . . isolate women at home in unsafe environments without working telephones or accessible roads; contact with crisis counselors may be cut off and court-ordered protection unavailable when major disasters disrupt or destroy lifeline services, including law enforcement agencies. (Enarson 1997: 2)

Domestic violence is not confined to a particular social class, and such cases could be found anywhere. Where a refuge is known to exist, then its particular vulnerability in time of disaster should be

recognized and acted upon (Enarson 1997). But effective progress in this initiative depends on prior networking between relevant groups to reduce women's vulnerability (Neal and Phillips 1990).

Thus the middle-class women, perceived to be at the resilient end of the vulnerability-resilience continuum through their access to resources, may not always be so. They may be isolated and cut off from social networks which might aid them—perhaps through physical distance, perhaps because of the social stigma attached to seeking help from welfare agencies, perhaps as the result of individual life events and emotional/psychological difficulties. Their material position may aid resilience, but they may still be in need of counseling or advice or other kinds of support.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper examines gender and, more specifically, social class in two major flood events and argues for a more nuanced appreciation of these factors, at both the conceptual and the practical level, to be incorporated throughout the disaster process. Disaster management decisions are often influenced by an over-simple conception of their social setting and fail to recognize the internal diversity of communities that may demand greater, fewer, or different resources. A recognition of difference, as suggested above, can lead to more efficient, effective, and sympathetic resource allocation. This need not result in an absolute increase in funding or staffing but rather a rethinking of some resourcing decisions. These points are expanded under separate headings below.

Empowering the victims/survivors

Those who experience floods and other disasters can (and often do, if allowed) make their own contributions towards management. Too often, professionals enter the disaster area with the intention of taking complete control and overriding existing networks and abilities (this is particularly the case in working-class areas). Placing women

in emergency rest centers and administering to them in a top-down fashion can be disempowering and often demeaning. A better way of thinking about such emergency provision is in terms of an enabling function that gives victims/survivors greater control and the space to make a positive contribution. This is beginning to be recognized by some disaster workers, generally those in the social work field:

For God's sake! You've got resources! You've got 300 people sitting here! Traumatized they may be but they're not incapables. Yesterday they were running households, they were managing . . . that hasn't been destroyed overnight. They still have those qualities and maybe we should be the ones that's giving them those back. [Social worker, part of the Flood Team]

* * *

It seems like a very "social work" kind of thing to say but I think it's important that people don't get overrun in terms of the decision making process. That people have various capacities to make decisions, we all have those capacities and we should make sure that folks will be allowed to make those decisions and we should not make those decisions for them. But . . . I'm not saying we shouldn't give them support, advice and help. It's remarkable how some people . . . they realize there's a crisis, they call out, "What're we going to do?" With a bit of advice and a bit of help they reach their own decisions about what they want to do and that seems to me perfectly correct that they did that. Other people, with less resources, couldn't make decisions and in a sense we sought to make more decisions on their behalf. I suppose. With the less resourceful folk. [Social worker]

Retaining self-esteem

Official provision, however well-intentioned, can be unpalatable and, because of that, may be subverted. One elderly flood victim/

survivor revealed that she continued to attend a weekly "drop-in" center, set up by a social services department to provide community support for flood victims/survivors, not because she still had need of it but to support the social workers who were running it! It is important for people's self-respect that they are not always on the receiving end but feel that they are in a position to give. This woman retained self-esteem through the belief that she was the one that was providing.

The right person for the job

Furthermore, while this paper has focused on some of the diversity and the conflicts within the victim/survivor community, there is equal diversity and conflict within the disaster management community. Disasters are high profile events, and they can make or break people's professional careers. They are perceived by some to be "plum jobs": "Disasters are sexy! Professionals often get involved, not out of altruism but out of a recognition that they can see an opening, they are empire building, then they get in there and close the doors to other people who genuinely want to lend a hand." [Social Worker].

Some professionals are not the right persons for the job. They are there for a variety of reasons and skill and experience may not be included; neither is a willingness to relinquish control. Placing more control with the communities themselves is necessary to ensure the correct identification of problems and needs from a community perspective (see Maskrey 1989). These needs, and the accompanying provision, are also likely to be diverse; what is suitable for one group may not be suitable for another. If provision is made that is unsuitable, then it means resources are being wasted.

The need to understand social theory

This adds to the skills necessary for emergency/disaster managers and calls more for an understanding of social theory in disaster management than an extension or improvement of technical abilities. This is normally the province of social workers, often at the later stages of the disaster process, but the research presented above suggests a

need at all stages and for all disaster workers. Clearly resources are not infinite, and choices must be made about where to allocate them. The bulk of resources must still go to the areas containing the largest numbers or the hardest hit (in terms of physical damage or danger), but other groups and individuals outside this area must also be evaluated for need. We cannot assume that a woman in a middle-class area, with some capital and insurance, will necessarily be resilient in an extreme event. A minimum level of support must be available, should it be necessary. But neither can we assume that a working-class woman is without all resources or the ability to articulate her needs. A sensitivity to difference is required.

CONCLUSION

Disasters are not the great levelers that they are sometimes claimed to be, but neither are they understood in terms of a simple code of social stratification. This is not to deny that social class remains a key determinant of vulnerability and that working-class communities generally will be materially more affected, but rather to claim a greater variability than disaster managers sometimes recognize. Gender-sensitive analyses also show a differential experience and response, but much more work remains to be done in this area, particularly with men's experiences. This paper argues for a more nuanced appreciation of these factors, at both the conceptual and the practical level, to be incorporated throughout the disaster process.

4

GENDER AND DISASTER.

A synthesis of flood research in Bangladesh

William E. Lovekamp

INTRODUCTION

Despite the wide body of literature on disasters and their impacts, there has been a persistent "gender silence" in disaster work (Bhatt 1995:3; Enarson and Fordham 2001; Fothergill 1998). Bolin, Jackson, and Crist (1998: 29) argue, "the voice of women is indeed the most noticeable absence in the literature." This gender silence is systemic as it is very evident within the larger political arena and social structure. As Siddiqui (2001: 1A) states "still they [women] are subjects of discrimination in every day life and cannot achieve minimum humane respect from the male-dominated social systems." Gender is a critical variable that researchers have too often ignored. A gender-neutral stance is frequently taken in disaster research which causes the differential impacts and experiences of disasters to be overlooked and men's experience is considered to be representative (Fordham 1998). Furthermore, the research community has only recently admitted that "exposure to risk of disaster is shaped by overarching social structures of caste and class, race and ethnicity, age and physical ability, and sex and gender" (Enarson and Morrow 1998:7) *We must acknowledge...*

WOMEN AND DISASTERS

From Theory To Practice

Edited by

Brenda D. Phillips and
Betty Hearn Morrow

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